

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06
OMB-01 TRSE-00 EB-08 AGRE-00 COME-00 /070 W
-----087913 130944Z /15
R 130804Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY TOKYO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6066

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TOKYO 4009

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, JA
SUBJECT: NEW LIBERAL CLUB SHIFTS RIGHT

SUMMARY: NEW LIBERAL CLUB (NLC) HAS TAKEN SIGNIFICANT STEP TOWARD LDP IN ITS NEW ACTION PROGRAM (ADOPTED FEB. 28), WHICH COMMITS PARTY TO CONSIDER COALITION WITH LDP SHOULD LATTER LOSE ITS MAJORITY, AND BY VOTING ALONE WITH LDP TO PASS JFY 78 BUDGET (MARCH 7). WHILE MORE CONSERVATIVE IMAGE MAY STRENGTHEN NLC'S APPEAL TO SOME, PARTICULARLY RURAL, VOTERS WHO HAVE TRADITIONALLY SUPPORTED LDP, IT STRIKES US AS RISKY STRATEGY FOR FLEDGLING PARTY BASED ON FRESH, YOUTHFUL IMAGE. MEANWHILE, NLC SHIFT FURTHER INSURES CONTINUANCE OF LDP OR LDP-DOMINATED GOVERNMENTS IN JAPAN. END SUMMARY.

1. TWENTY MONTHS FOLLOWING PARTY INAUGURATION, NEW LIBERAL CLUB (NLC) HAS TAKEN SIGNIFICANT STEP TOWARD COALITION WITH LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY (LDP) SHOULD LATTER EVER LOSE ITS DIET MAJORITY. AT ITS FIRST CONVENTION FEB. 28, NLC ADOPTED PROGRAM CRITICIZING JAPAN SOCIALIST PARTY (JSP) AND JAPAN COMMUNIST PARTY (JCP) AS UNDEMOCRATIC AND STATING THAT CENTRIST CLEAN GOVERNMENT PARTY (CGP) AND DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST PARTY (DSP), WITH WHICH NLC IS FREQUENTLY ASSOCIATED, WERE NOT READY TO FORM BASIS FOR DEMOCRATIC COALITION GOVERNMENT IN CURRENT POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT.
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ALTHOUGH NLC ALSO CASTIGATED LDP FOR CORRUPTION, DECREPITUDE, AND FAILURE TO DEVISE NEW POLICIES ON PRESSING ISSUES SUCH AS FOOD SUPPLY, IT STATED THAT FOR FORESEEABLE FUTURE LDP WOULD BE ONLY PARTY CAPABLE OF FORMING COALITION GOVERNMENT THAT WOULD PROTECT DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM. THEREFORE, NLC COMMITTED ITSELF TO CONSIDER COALITION WITH LDP, POSSIBLY ALONG WITH

ONE OR TWO CENTRIST PARTIES, IN EVENT LDP LOST ITS DIET MAJORITY.

2. UP TO TIME OF CONVENTION, NLC HAD COOPERATED CLOSELY WITH DSP AND CGP, PRESSING LDP SUBSTANTIALLY TO REDUCE TAXES AND INCREASE WELFARE BENEFITS IN JFY 1978 BUDGET. BUT IN SWIFT TURNABOUT, NLC ALONE ACCEPTED LDP BUDGET PROPOSAL AND PROVIDED CRUCIAL BUDGET COMMITTEE SUPPORT TO SECURE BILL'S LOWER HOUSE PASSAGE.

3. VERNACULAR PRESS WAS PREDICTABLY CRITICAL OF NLC SHIFT. MOST PAPERS NOTED THAT BY ACCEPTING IN PRINCIPLE COALITION WITH LIBERAL DEMOCRATS, ABANDONED BY NLC FOUNDERS LESS THAN TWO YEARS AGO AS HOPELESSLY CORRUPT AND INCAPABLE OF REJUVENATION, NLC WAS NOW OBSCURING ITS MISSION AND HELPING TO PROP UP DECLINING LDP. EVEN RELATIVELY CONSERVATIVE NIHON KEIZAI SHIMBUN WAS CONCERNED THAT PARTY'S FAILURE TO SPELL OUT NEW INNOVATIVE POLICIES WOULD FAIL TO CONVINCE ELECTORATE THAT VOTE FOR NLC WAS ANY DIFFERENT FROM VOTE FOR LDP. CENTRIST OPPOSITION PARTIES, CAUGHT OFF GUARD BY NLC SHIFT, HAVE REFRAINED FROM CRITICIZING ERSTWHILE PARTNERS TOO SEVERELY, BUT HAVE HINTED IN SPEECHES AND IN PRIVATE, THAT NLC WAS NO LONGER TRUSTWORTHY ALLY. IN ATTEMPT TO ANSWER BAD PUBLICITY, NLC LEADER KONO AND OTHER PARTY OFFICIALS HAVE STRESSED THAT PARTY WOULD NOT

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JOIN COALITION WITH LDP "AS PRESENTLY CONSTITUTED."

4. NLC DIETMEN TOLD EMBOFF THEY WERE SURPRISED AT EXTENT OF NEGATIVE REACTION TO POLICY ON COALITION, BUT JUSTIFIED SHIFT ON GROUNDS THAT NLC'S IMAGE NEEDED SHARPER, MORE CONSERVATIVE DEFINITION TO ATTRACT NEW VOTERS. ONE OF PARTY'S YOUNGER DIETMEN TOLD EMBOFF THAT SINCE SIX NLC FOUNDERS BROKE WITH LDP IN JUNE 1976, ATTACKS ON LDP CORRUPTION AND OPPOSITION TO GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION SUCH AS JAPAN-ROK CONTINENTAL SHELF AGREEMENT HAD GRADUALLY CREATED IMPRESSION THAT NLC WAS NO DIFFERENT FROM OTHER CENTRIST OPPOSITION PARTIES FURTHER TO LEFT. HE SAID THIS IMPRESSION HAD BEEN ONE REASON FOR NLC'S FAILURE TO WIN MORE SEATS IN LAST YEAR'S UPPER HOUSE ELECTIONS. INASMUCH AS MANY IN NLC BELIEVE LDP WILL LOSE ITS LOWER HOUSE MAJORITY IN NEXT GENERAL ELECTION AND NLC BEING PRESSED BY VOTERS TO MAKE ITS STAND ON COALITION GOVERNMENT CLEAR, PARTY FELT IT SHOULD REAFFIRM ITS MISSION TO MAINTAIN CONSERVATIVE, DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT IN JAPAN, EVEN IF THAT MEANT ACCEPTING NECESSITY TO EVENTUAL TIE-UP WITH LDP.

5. AT SAME TIME, DIETMEN SAID, THERE WAS SUBSTANTIAL DIVISION WITHIN NLC LEADERSHIP OVER SHARPENING CONSERVATIVE IMAGE WHICH CONTINUED UNTIL LAST MINUTE BEFORE CONVENTION OPENED. SEC GEN NISHIOKA AND SOME OTHER NLC FOUNDERS ARE COMMITTED TO BASICALLY CONSERVATIVE, LDP-STYLE POLICIES AND SEE NO POSSIBILITY OF WORKABLE COALITION GOVERNMENT BEING FORMED BY NLC AND OTHER OPPOSITION PARTIES. SUPPORTING THEM ARE HANDFUL OF NLC DIETMEN ELECTED WITH SUBSTANTIAL AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT AND REPRESENTATIVES OF NEWLY CREATED PARTY ORGANIZATIONS IN RURAL DISTRICTS, WHO BELIEVE THEIR POLITICAL FUTURE DEPENDS ON MAKING NLC APPEAR AT LEAST AS CONSERVATIVE AS LDP WHOSE TRADITIONAL BASE
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THEY ARE ATTEMPTING TO USURP. THIS ALLIANCE MANAGED TO OVERPOWER MORE URBAN-ORIENTED NLC DIETMEN, WHO

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OMB-01 TRSE-00 EB-08 AGRE-00 COME-00 /070 W
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6067

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 TOKYO 4009

WOULD PREFER TO SEE PARTY OBSCURE ITS POSITION ON LEFT/RIGHT POLITICAL SPECTRUM AND CONCENTRATE ON DEVISING NEW POLICIES, SUCH AS INCREASING AGRICULTURAL IMPORTS, WHICH MIGHT APPEAL TO URBAN VOTERS. NEW PROGRAM, THEY FEAR, WOULD ALMOST INEVITABLY REDUCE PARTY'S URBAN VOTE.

6. COALITION WAS MAJOR ISSUE AT CONVENTION, WHICH

OTHERWISE DID LITTLE TO FLESH OUT NLC'S RATHER SKIMPY PLATFORM. FOLLOWING REPORT TO CONVENTION ON DEC. 1977 VISIT TO ROK BY NLC UPPER HOUSE MEMBER KAZUHI SA ARITA, TWO NLC REPRESENTATIVES EXPLAINED SUPPORT FOR FURTHER CONTACTS WITH SOUTH KOREA AS EXPRESSION OF PARTY'S FAITH THAT AS ROK'S ECONOMY GROWS, AND AS YOUNGER GENERATION OF LEADERS EDUCATED ABROAD CAME TO POWER, REGIME THAT NLC CONSIDERED CORRUPT AND REPRESSIVE WOULD BE REPLACED BY MORE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT. NLC HOPED TO ENCOURAGE THIS TRANSITION BY FORGING CLOSER TIES TO ROK OPPOSITION PARTIES. AT SAME TIME, NLC STILL BELIEVED JAPAN COULD BEST INSURE THAT NORTH KOREA RESISTED TEMPTION TO MILITARY ADVENTURISM BY ASSISTING ITS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND NLC MIGHT STILL ACCEPT INVITATION, OUTSTANDING SINCE NLC FORMED, TO VISIT PYONGYANG IF DETAILS COULD BE WORKED OUT.

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7. COMMENT: NLC'S NEW PROGRAM REPRESENTS YOUNG PARTY'S STRUGGLE TO COME TO TERMS WITH PERCEIVED END OF POPULAR ENTHUSIASM WHICH GAVE PARTY ITS INITIAL SURPRISING SUCCESS IN 1976 GENERAL ELECTION, AND TO DISTINGUISH PARTY FROM REST OF INCREASINGLY CROWDED OPPOSITION FIELD. NEED FOR NEW DEPARTURE HAS BEEN FELT EVER SINCE NLC'S POOR SHOWING IN LAST SUMMER'S UPPER HOUSE CONTEST GAVE RISE TO IMPRESSION THAT PARTY'S SWIFT INITIAL RISE WAS EPHEMERAL, AND THAT YOUNG GROUP WOULD HAVE DIFFICULTY HOLDING PRESENT SEATS IN FUTURE ELECTIONS. LAST SUMMER'S ELECTION ALSO SEEMED TO INDICATE THAT LDP HAD CONSIDERABLY MORE STAYING POWER THAN ANYONE THOUGHT IN 1976, WHEN NLC MEMBERS BROKE AWAY IN MIDST OF LOCKHEED SCANDAL. NLC HAS HAD TO FACE FACT THAT LDP LIKELY TO REMAIN, IF NOT MAJORITY PARTY, AT LEAST OVERWHELMING DOMINANT PARTNER IN ANY NEAR-TERM COALITION GOVERNMENT. IN ADDITION, GROWING COOPERATION BETWEEN DSP AND CGP HAS TENDED TO ISOLATE NLC IN DIET NEGOTIATIONS.

8. NEW PROGRAM HAS INCREASED NLC POTENTIAL TO JOIN COALITION GOVERNMENT, AND OBTAIN CABINET SEATS, SHOULD LDP LOSE ITS MAJORITY, AND SHOULD HELP ATTRACT KIND OF YOUNG BUSINESSMEN AND PROFESSIONALS WHO FORM BEDROCK OF NLC SUPPORT IN MANY COMMUNITIES AND SUPPLY BULK OF CANDIDATES. IN ADDITION, NEW PROGRAM WILL ALSO IMPROVE NLC'S ACCEPTANCE IN RURAL AREAS WHERE IT IS ATTEMPTING TO UNDERCUT LDP SUPPORT.

9. AT SAME TIME NEW PROGRAM MAY WELL BACKFIRE. LDP

CAN NOW CLAIM WITH GREATER JUSTIFICATION THAT NLC IS
JUST SMALL GROUP OF YOUNG MALCONTENTS WITH LITTLE NEW
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TO OFFER. MOREOVER, CENTRIST OPPOSITION PARTIES WILL
CERTAINLY TAKE ADVANTAGE OF NLC SHIFT TO RIGHT TO
APPEAL TO ITS FORMER URBAN SUPPORTERS.

10. OUR INITIAL IMPRESSION IS THAT NLC'S MOVE WILL,
IN SHORT TERM, SOLIDIFY ITS MODEST ORGANIZATIONAL BASE
AND VIRTUALLY GUARANTEE LDP AT LEAST ONE COALITION
PARTNER SHOULD LIBERAL DEMOCRATS LOSE THEIR MAJORITY.
IT ALSO REDUCES DIET--AND COALITION--BARGAINING
POWER OF DSP AND CGP. IN LONG RUN, HOWEVER, NLC
SHIFT MAY WORK TO DETRIMENT OF BOTH CONSERVATIVE
PARTIES BY DENYING MANY URBAN AND UNCOMMITTED VOTERS
ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVE TO SOCIALIST OR RELIGIOUS-BASED
OPPOSITION PARTIES. MOREOVER, WHILE NLC MAY MANAGE
TO ATTRACT SOME PRESENT LDP VOTERS WITH ITS MORE CONSER-
VATIVE TACK, IT IS A RISKY STRATEGY FOR FLEDGLING PARTY
WHOSE STOCK IN TRADE IS ITS FRESH YOUTHFUL IMAGE.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PARTY STRENGTH, POLITICAL SITUATION, POLITICAL PARTIES, LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 13 mar 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978TOKYO04009
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780111-0334
Format: TEL
From: TOKYO
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780374/aaaackpgg.tel
Line Count: 250
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 6c01f6c7-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION EA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 09 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3348189
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: NEW LIBERAL CLUB SHIFTS RIGHT SUMMARY: NEW LIBERAL CLUB (NLC) HAS TAKEN SIGNIFICANT STEP TOWARD LDP IN ITS NEW ACTION PROGRAM (ADOPTED FEB.
TAGS: PINT, JA
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/6c01f6c7-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014